

## Country Report: Philosophy at Secondary Schools in the Netherlands

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### Brief history<sup>1</sup>

Philosophy was introduced in secondary schools in the Netherlands in 1973, on an experimental basis. The first national examination took place in May 1974. A small number of students answered questions about a text, written by the academic philosopher Hendrik Pos, 'Het dal van de naoorlogse filosofie', which can be translated as 'The downturn of post-war philosophy'. By 1990 Philosophy was an experimental course in the pre-university track (VWO) at twelve secondary schools. During that year, the decision was taken by the government to introduce Philosophy as a standard curriculum subject, making it possible for every secondary school to offer Philosophy as an elective course. This decision was based on the positive outcomes of evaluations by headteachers, students and parents. Between 1990 and 1998 the number of schools offering philosophy rose from twelve to forty-two. Following this initial surge, further expansion in the number of schools offering Philosophy was sparked by the major restructuring of the education system 'Tweede Fase' ('Second Phase'). This was a renewal of the Dutch education system, in which students at the end of the basic curriculum had to make a choice out of four tracks (Economics & Society, Culture & Society, Nature & Health, Nature & Technology). From now on, schools could offer Philosophy not only at the pre-university level of VWO, but also at the pre-higher vocational level of HAVO. In 2018, the number of schools offering Philosophy as an exam subject has stabilized at 60 HAVO schools and 160 VWO schools (10% and 25% of the total number of schools nationally). Philosophy as a subject in the first three years of HAVO and VWO is offered at about 50 schools.<sup>2</sup>

### Philosophy in the lower grades

The motive for schools to offer Philosophy in the lower grades is to acquaint students with a subject they can choose in the upper grades. There is no obligatory curriculum for Philosophy in these grades, meaning that teachers are free to develop their own course. In spite of this freedom, most teachers choose to focus on moral education through critical thinking. *Philosophy in the lower grades*, a program which has been developed by teachers in

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<sup>1</sup> For an extended view on Philosophy at Secondary Schools in the Netherlands: Oosthoek, D.H. (2007). Balans van 35 jaar filosofie in het voortgezet onderwijs. *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 69, 783-809.

<sup>2</sup> Dutch secondary education begins at the age of approximately twelve and is divided into three main streams: 50% of learners follow preparatory vocational education (VMBO, 4 years), the other 50% being spread across higher general education (HAVO, 5 years) and preparatory academic education (VWO, 6 years). Learners following a general route (HAVO) will be likely to progress to higher vocational degrees such as nursing, hotel management, paralegal or technical studies.

philosophy in the lower grades, aims to broaden this focus.<sup>3</sup> This curriculum offers examples of lessons on about fourteen philosophical questions such as *'What is logical thinking?'*, *'What can you be sure of?'*, *'Are we free to become who we want to be?'*, *'What is the relation between body and mind?'* or *'Are all humans equal?'*.

### **Philosophy in the upper grades**

Like other school subjects in the Netherlands, Philosophy in the upper grades of HAVO and VWO has a program which includes both internal and external assessment. The HAVO curriculum differs from the VWO curriculum. The first program is focused on students with a more practical mind set and preparing for higher vocational education, while the second is focused on students who will continue their education at university. The HAVO curriculum is therefore more practical and focuses on humanities. It consists of three main domains: anthropology, ethics and social philosophy. The VWO curriculum is more academic and has four main domains: anthropology, ethics, theory of knowledge and philosophy of science. For the elements that are internally assessed, teachers have much freedom to shape their own program, as they can choose between six different textbooks and find their own ways to examine their subject matter. This freedom does not extend to the preparation for the external examination. Teachers have to adhere to detailed demands which are centered around a specific theme. This theme is laid out in a textbook that consists of a general introduction by academic specialists as well as primary sources from representative philosophers. Examples of these themes at HAVO are: Men and Machine, Utopia, Philosophy of Emotions, Global Justice, and Philosophy of the Self. Examples of themes at VWO level are: Virtue Ethics, Reason and Religion, Free Will, Scepticism, and The Good Life and The Free Market.

### **Didactical perspective and examination**

Philosophy in the Dutch setting is characterized on the one hand with 'Bildung' and on the other hand as 'learning to philosophize'. Students learn to actively deal with the most important approaches and concepts from the philosophical tradition by applying this knowledge to direct philosophical questions, such as *'Are animals able to think?'*, *'Do you have a personal responsibility for poverty in the world?'*, *'Why pay taxes?'* or *'Has religion become redundant in the light of the growth of scientific knowledge?'*. Students are expected not only to be able to recognize, name, compare or criticize the arguments from different philosophical positions, but also to be able to take on a personal and argued view on the subject matter.

National examinations also reflect this structure: the candidates are guided through different cases, whereby they have to analyze central philosophical concepts and apply their knowledge of different philosophical positions before they formulate a personal, reasoned and well-argued point of view.

Teachers of Philosophy prefer to focus on the higher-order skills of in-depth analysis and synthesis rather than focusing on reproduction of knowledge. With the exams the teachers develop in their own schools, there are more possibilities for assessing pupils through other

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<sup>3</sup> [www.slo.nl/downloads/2013/filosofie-in-de-onderbouw.pdf](http://www.slo.nl/downloads/2013/filosofie-in-de-onderbouw.pdf)

means than written tests. Knowledge and philosophical skills can be applied and graded through Socratic dialogues, in appreciative inquiries, in writing a philosophical dialogue or essay, in a systematic analysis of a philosophical concept or doing research on a specific philosophical topic.

### **Effects of philosophical education**

Results from various kinds of research focusing on students and former students indicate that Philosophy supports the development of abilities in clarifying abstract concepts, stimulates insights into presuppositions, gaining a quick overview of arguments in debates, taking on a personal and argued view, and fosters thinking on a cross-curricular level. Next to this it is remarkable that the (former) students often name the significance of Philosophy for the growth of their personality.

### **The role of the organization of teachers in philosophy**

The VFVO (Society of Teachers of Philosophy in Secondary Education) was founded in 1998 and currently has 180 members. The society has a digital magazine named 'Spinoza'. The VFVO organizes training activities for teachers of Philosophy, initiates meetings to discuss the way in which the national exams should be assessed, gives general information about the subject on their website (URL: [www.vfvo.nl](http://www.vfvo.nl)) and lobbies on the political level for the position of Philosophy in the curriculum.

### **International relations**

Since 2012 there has been a Dutch Philosophy Olympiad (URL: [www.filosofieolympiade.nl](http://www.filosofieolympiade.nl)). The core of this Olympiad is a contest in essay-writing and is held annually in Leusden at the International School of Philosophy (URL: [www.isvw.nl](http://www.isvw.nl)). The two winners attend the IPO (International Philosophy Olympiad) to challenge fellow pupils on an international level. In May 2017 the 25th Jubilee edition of the IPO was successfully held at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. The conjunctive theme was Tolerance.

## Country Report: Norway

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The only option to study philosophy for a high school student at the regular high schools in Norway (i.e. not IB-schools), which lasts for three years from age 16 to 19, is to choose (among a wide variety of subjects from science to particular languages) the optional subject called *History and Philosophy* in their second and third grade. Ethical Education in high school is connected to the compulsory subject *Religion*, 3 lessons per week, in third grade. This subject also includes a relatively small part of philosophy. In Middle School (*ungdomsskole*), age 13-16, ethics is part of the compulsory subject *Christianity, Religion, Philosophy of Life and Ethics*. Here there is a lot of political discussion regarding the amount of time prescribed to the teaching of Christianity compared to the time prescribed for other major religions.

*History and Philosophy* is taught at one third of all high schools, and the amount of pupils is around ten percent, and compared to what is tradition for philosophy-teaching in Norway this is a high number. It is a 5 hours per week course, where it is possible to finish the subject after the second grade part (until ca 1850), without attending the third grade course (a modern perspective). There are locally administered oral exams after the second and third grade course, and nationally administered written exams after the third grade course. Most of the students will have to do one of these exams.

The reason behind putting history and philosophy together in one course is that both subjects, each in their own way, try to say something about and question who we are, how we are brought here, and what our possibilities are. The main topics in philosophy are the classical ones: ontology and metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and existentialism and philosophy of science – all presented both historically and from our own modern (or post-modern) point of view.

*History and Philosophy* is one among other voluntary and compulsory courses at high school who leads to *examen artium*, which means that you are ready for entering the university. Beside this the course doesn't give any special benefits. So the pupils mainly choose the subject because of their interests and the idea of philosophy expands their intellectuality and helps them in other subjects and their academic career.

*History and Philosophy* was introduced through a (yet another) new school reform in 2007. Earlier, philosophy was only taught at a few high schools as a two hours a week course. It was voluntary and there were no national written exam. For the last decade it has been an outspoken policy from the school authorities that philosophy has to be strengthened in the pre-university education. Therefore, this new subject arises at the high schools and philosophy has become a bigger part of other courses as well. This includes both at high school and primary school, in subjects like history, social science and religion. The amount of students choosing History and Philosophy has been a great inspiration to any philosophy teacher in Norway, and has meant that all the history teachers now teaching this subject have been forced to re-educate themselves in the history and didactics of philosophy for the first time

since their *examen philosophicum*. A one term compulsory introductory philosophy course all students at the universities of Norway have to attend. This exam means that everyone with an academic education at least know the basic history of philosophy, logic and philosophy of science.

The status of philosophy in general is relatively good in Norway today. The number of students at the institutes is increasing, and the education authorities are aware of the benefits. Skills in philosophical thinking among the population - in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres of society – are needed for ongoing discourses and debates. Even though the career-possibilities for full-time philosophical activities are not that wide, especially not in the private sector, there are still some signals which say that critical thinking, proficiency in analysing problems and dilemmas, and the power of understanding political and moral situations through universal concepts are needed dexterities also in the working life.